



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

April 1984

WORSHIP

All too often when we think about living the Christian life, we think of it in terms of our individual devotions: private prayer and meditation, fasting, living by rule, learning to cultivate the virtues and to love other people. We think of our private spiritual lives. We know, of course, that there is more to it. We go to church, among other things. And that is usually how we got started in our private devotions: we heard about them in church -- or else our experience of what went on in church led us to seek something more from how we lived outside of church.

Corporate worship, which is most of what we do in church, is an essential element in a balanced spiritual life. It is also one we tend to take for granted, concentrating our energies instead on our private devotions. We cannot live our spiritual lives completely by ourselves, though we sometimes think that would be more convenient. Scripture is clear that we are members one of another in Christ, and that the corporate worship of the faithful is an essential activity of the Church. If we have ever tried to live the life of a private Christian, without any relationship with the Church, we know that that doesn't get us very far. Our religion soon becomes shallow and unfulfilling. We find that we can say all the right words (or so it seems) but an essential element is missing.

Corporate prayer is not easy. Since for most of us it is the first step into the Church, we are inclined to think that it should be easy. On one level, it is not hard to come together with others and read all the same words, or kneel together for a time. But that does not necessarily

make it prayer. In some ways it is much harder to pray together than it is alone. But both are essential for the mature Christian.

The greatest obstacle to corporate prayer is the distraction provided by the others present. Our Adversary is always quick to exploit this. If you see someone you know to be a sinner -- a glutton or an adulterer or a gossip or someone materialistic and greedy -- immediately the temptation arises to look down on them, to feel how much more worthy you are than they to be present at the altar of God. Or just seeing people there who rub you the wrong way and knowing that you shouldn't feel that instant dislike for them is a great distraction. You can spend a lot of time and more effort thinking about how you should deal with them, rather than attending to your prayer. Or perhaps (God forbid), you find the priest celebrating at the altar a difficult person, or one who celebrates strangely. That, too, will be an occasion for your attention to wander from its proper focus.

Difficult as all these are when you are in the middle of them, they are all opportunities for you to learn how to worship. The only way to learn is by doing. So set yourself to the task at hand. These distractions are to be dealt with just like the distractions which arise in your private prayers. When you are tempted to distraction by one thing or another, gently let it go: it does not really require your attention at this time. Let it go and gently bring yourself back to the service. You need not be upset with yourself for being distracted: if anything, it is an opportunity to laugh at your weakness and see how much you need God. For you find that you cannot even pay attention all during the service left to your own devices.

And that is the crucial foundation for Christian worship: you cannot do it yourself. It is not a work that we perform for God to earn His favor. We don't go to Church every Sunday in order to earn enough points to get us into heaven. We go because it is our nature to worship God. That is what we were created for. And we are meant to return the love which God gives us. Worship is our offering of our adoration, of ourselves, in thanksgiving for what God has done for us. It is the return of His love to Himself through us.

That means that worship is something that He does, in us. It is not basically our action, but His. It requires our consent, our cooperation. But it is basically His. That means that we must offer the best that we are capable of. Nothing less will do. The offering of a blind lamb for a sacrifice when we could offer a perfect one doesn't say much for our commitment to God. But we must always recognize that the lamb is from God in the first place, and that it is His action in the sacrifice that makes the lamb acceptable.

If worship is basically God's action, then we need not be distracted by the worthiness of the other people present. That isn't really

our concern. Once we have realized our own unworthiness, the shabbiness of our offering of ourselves, then we will no longer be tempted to condescend to others. Our other distractions can also be vanquished by asserting the primacy of God's action: for so long as His action is present, all else is secondary.

There may be times when we feel that the offering of the worship could be better made: that the lamb is a little on the blind side. But our efforts to change things of this sort will not interfere with our worship if we offer the best that we have and let God take care of it from there. If the rest of the congregation does not agree that the changes we would make would be an improvement, so be it. Then we must worship anyway, offering up to God what seems to us to be a defect in the forms of worship. This is possible, though not always easy, so long as we remember that it is the substance that is important: adoration.

Spiritually, it is necessary for our growth to have a regular commitment to corporate worship. Minimally, this means every Sunday and great Feast. Then we will be there, whether it is really convenient or not. For we go not because we feel like it on any given day, but because as Christians we want to worship: that is the desire of the soul if not always of the emotions. As responsible Christians, that is the desire we will act on.

Once we have made it to church, we will find that there are three ways that we can worship. Chances are we will find ourselves in all three at one time or another.

The first is mere physical attendance, just being there. This happens (for example) when you have a cold, or were out too late the night before, or are completely preoccupied with a relationship or a decision. At these times, you cannot even follow along with the service very well, much less find your heart uplifted to God. You are just there. On such mornings, when you get out of bed to go to church, the temptation will arise to think that you are not going to be able to pray anyway, so why not go back to bed. That is the temptation of thinking that God wants only your pious thoughts in worship. God, however, asks of you no more than you are capable of (with His help). Some days, that is just getting out to be present at worship. If you are capable of more, great. But if not, that in itself is your offering for that day: your offering of yourself. It may not seem like much, but its very difficulty, and the desire of will with which it is offered, make it your true offering.

Next, after mere physical presence at worship, is the mode that is normal for most of us most of the time: the intellectually attentive. This is when you are there and follow along with what is going on, with a few small distractions here and there. Basically you are

paying attention. You offer the prayers as they come along, praying with your mind as well as your body.

The third mode comes to most of us once in a while. This is when we are taken up spiritually into the worship. It is beyond following along with the texts. It is a real communion with God in spirit. The experience may be accompanied by a new insight into God and our relationship with Him. But more often, it is just (!) an experience of His Presence which affects the heart, the spirit, even more than the mind. It is a sort of experience of God which comes only in worship, quite different from the experiences we have of Him in our solitary silence.

We would all like to be constantly in the third mode. But as physical and intellectual creatures as well as spiritual, that does not seem to be the way for us. Since it is God praying through us, we can rejoice in whatever particular state we find ourselves in, so long as we are honestly offering the best that is in us. We need not get upset with ourselves because we are stuck in the second mode -- or even in the first. For even that can be used by God for greater things than we can desire or imagine.

We go to church not for what we get out of it. It is not entertainment, nor even for our instruction and edification. The purpose of Sunday worship is not first of all to make us better people. It is to praise God. It is to adore God. It is to give Him the glory that is His due as Creator and Redeemer of the world. It is to worship Him as God. As His creatures, and as His adopted children, we need to do this. We need to do it whether we get anything out of the experience or not. Of course, God has designed the whole system so that we do get a lot out of it. We do learn things about who God is and what He has done for us. We also learn about ourselves and about each other. And sometimes, at least, we are entertained, our senses and emotions and intellect engaged in the experience, as well (God willing) as our spirit.

But that is all secondary. We go because we need to worship. It is something that can only be done together. It is the common need of human beings, and especially of Christians (for that is the way to be human). Our place in creation leads us to present ourselves, our souls and bodies, before the throne of God. It is where we belong. Like all prayer, it is a work of the Spirit within us, uniting us to God in creaturely adoration. The more we pray alone and in silence, the more we will recognize the need for corporate worship. The two grow together. Neither is easy. But then, God never meant to make life easy. He meant to make men great.

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